Briefing: Cornwall's Development and Decision Wheel: An innovative approach to decision making

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Summary

In this briefing, Cornwall Council detail the Cornwall Development and Decision Wheel, a groundbreaking tool that has transformed the council's decision-making approach. Four years into its implementation, they explore the journey of this innovation, from its inception to its continuing application, and how it could inspire other councils to adopt similar approaches.

Briefing in full

Background

Cornwall has a rich culture and a unique history and language. This originality has

led Cornwall, and its unitary authority Cornwall Council, to always be ambitious in its thinking and actions. Cornwall was the first rural area in the UK to negotiate one of the first devolution deals with Government in 2015 and was also one of the first unitary authorities to declare a climate emergency in January 2019.

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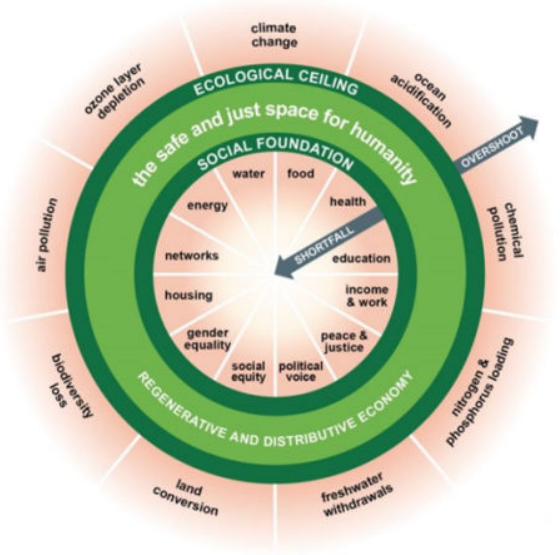
The Challenge

Following our 2019 climate emergency declaration, and through the development of our Carbon Neutral Cornwall Action Plan, we recognised the need for the Council to consider environmental impacts as part of our decision-making processes. As a result, we developed a Climate Change Decision Wheel (an excel-based tool) and piloted it for Cabinet decisions from late 2019 onwards. The wheel was based on doughnut economics, a concept pioneered by economist Kate Raworth. The 'doughnut' consists of a social foundation and an ecological ceiling. Between these boundaries lies a space that is both environmentally safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive. The CDDW aims to ensure, wherever possible, our decisions fall within that space.

While developing the Climate Change Wheel, we also recognised that consideration of the equality impacts of our decisions could be improved through a fresh equality impact assessment. Therefore, we decided to develop a single integrated digital tool that combined both processes into one and would highlight the environmental, social and equality and inclusion impacts of proposed decisions – a tool that would be routinely used at the outset of strategy/policy development and project/programme

planning.



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The Action Taken

In the summer of 2020, we brought together a team of policy and technical experts, from our Carbon Neutral Cornwall, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and in-house Information Services (IS) teams to create the Cornwall Development and Decision Wheel (CDDW). The tool was created using Microsoft Power Apps, which had already been in use across the organisation. with Microsoft Dynamics 365 enabling monitoring and tracking. We aimed to create, over a 12-month period, updated versions of the CDDW that could be tested and put into practice. We agreed on a five-point scale that would guide how we assessed impacts and started to develop both an environmental and social and equality and inclusion wheel.

Legend

- Long lasting or severe negative impact
- Short term or limited negative impact
- No or neutral impact
- Short term or limited positive impact
- Long lasting or extensive positive impact

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We worked with colleagues across the organisation to co-design the wheels and co-create the questions and methodology that underpin them. Within the environmental and social wheel, depending on the answers and numbers given, impacts are

automatically generated. Within the equality and inclusion wheel, impacts are assessed after weighing up evidence and consultation results. The entire CDDW process, including the production of a final report with the graphics, is housed on a dedicated portal. All staff have access as required.

We then looked at ways to ensure that all CDDWs were properly assessed. We already had equality action groups that supported equality impact assessments, and we worked with them to develop their knowledge and experience so they could act as 'critical friends' and review CDDWs, as part of a council-wide CDDW review process. We added a review and approval process to the portal which allowed the documenting of actions and recording of the status of a wheel.

We also recognised that sometimes more than one person would need to work on the CDDW and wanted to ensure that views from different departments could be sought as part of the process. We therefore created a co-author function that allowed the author to invite others to work on a CDDW and to bring in colleagues to discuss the answers to questions, helping break down departmental silos.

Once we had the above functions up and running, we looked at how to best roll out the tool to the wider organisation. We brought together a steering group of key colleagues from across the council to consider the processes through which they could use the tool initially. We delivered training and support in an agile way, conducting familiarisation sessions for those most likely to use the tool initially in their projects and to support key pieces of work.

The Impact

The CDDW has combined two separate processes into one, simplifying and removing duplication. It has been successful in improving the way the Council approaches decision-making. It has helped embed a new way of thinking, involving both Members and staff across the organisation. It has facilitated cross-department working, helping everyone break away from siloed thinking.

Cllr Linda Taylor, Leader of Cornwall Council 2021-2025, said

> *'This tool helps us to make decisions based on evidence and data. It helps us to step back and resist the temptation to be led by emotions and is vital to navigate complexity and understand and avoid unintended consequences'*

The CDDW has supported the assessment of some particularly challenging

decisions, and it is used to consider all proposals made as part of the annual budget setting process. Examples can be found on our **website**.

The Future

We continue to make improvements to the CDDW. Recent changes include:

The addition of 'Experience of care' as another key group within the equality and inclusion wheel, following a September 2023 Cornwall Cabinet decision to treat experience of care as a locally protected characteristic.

Updates to the Prosperity section to include questions which reflect our new Good Growth Plan:

- Access to training and qualifications and the impact on future job opportunities
- Whether employment opportunities created or lost are paying the real Living Wage
- The sectors in which we are encouraging growth within Cornwall, both through the establishment of new businesses and the development of existing ones

And to help guide future direction, in 2024 we conducted a user survey with authors, reviewers and approvers. We have used the results to create an action plan that will guide our digital improvements. This plan will also shape our approach to training and the further integration of CDDW into our governance.

We have already embedded CDDW guidance within our Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Human Rights mandatory e-learning to help staff gain a better understanding of the CDDW. And we are now creating bite-size video guides and will be conducting targeted refresher sessions. Additionally, we are enhancing the portal's functionality to better meet the organisation's needs and reduce administrative functions. Having the tool in place for a couple of years has allowed us to identify what works well and areas for improvement. We continue to work with our IS colleagues to find solutions.

Kate Evan-Hughes, Strategic Director, Children's Services and Council Director Team Equality Champion said: 'For this to be successful it can't be half-baked. Senior leaders must really own it and lead by example. It also requires investment into the model itself (and its refresh) and the IT application. Finally, there must be provision for users to be trained.'

We speak to many local authorities who are interested in developing a similar model. Here are some of the considerations:

- Think about the time, resources, and technical skills required. Consider what is achievable before you start out. Demands include the time and cost of developing the tool, as well as ways to engage and train colleagues.
- Get buy-in at the highest level and from across the organisation before you start. Cornwall Council's Chief Executive and political leaders were firm champions of the CDDW, and this helped its widespread adoption.
- Develop an internal communications plan to help make everyone aware of the reasons for the change and how the new decision-making process will work.
- Make the tool relevant. The questions and methodology are based on Cornwall's geography, economy, people and priorities. This will be different for each council, so it is vital to generate your own methodology to get the best out of any tool.